

**Melbourne's Wildlife:
a field guide to the fauna of Greater Melbourne**

By Museum Victoria

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In his foreword to this book, John Landy says it is '... a distillation of the knowledge of the museum's science department' and nineteen authors have contributed, most of them currently or previously with the Museum.

Scope

Planned to be the Victorian counterpart to similar books published by the Queensland Museum, its purpose is to allow identification of a large selection of species through the use of photographs and text. Each entry includes identification, habitat and range, and notes. Terrestrial and freshwater environments and marine environments are covered. The first section consists of

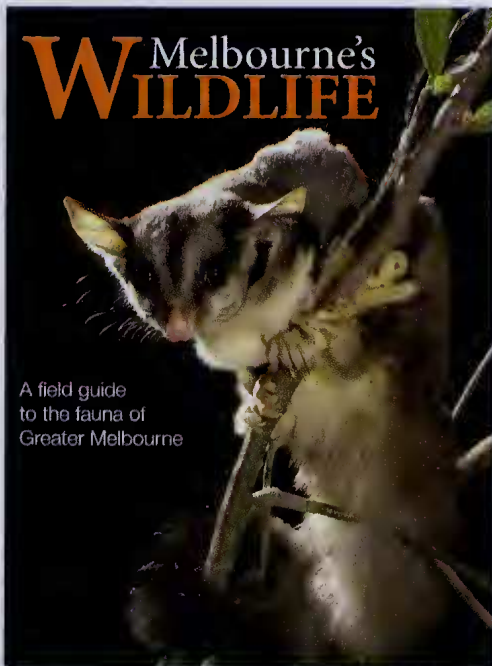
insects and other invertebrates, fish, frogs, reptiles, birds and mammals. Marine creatures are divided into sections for sessile invertebrates, jelly-like or free-floating, worms, echinoderms, molluscs, crustaceans, fish and mammals. With usually three species to a page, identifications are offered for 522 terrestrial and freshwater taxa and 186 marine taxa. Greater Melbourne is defined as the 14 200 sq. km reaching from Bacchus Marsh and Lerderberg State Park in the west to Toolangi in the north-east, all of Phillip Island in the south-east and Torquay in the south-west. Separate maps show reserves and places of interest for the terrestrial and marine sections. Well-known groups –

birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians – are chosen comprehensively. By necessity, invertebrates have had to be restricted to the common, the spectacular or the unusual. The marine section is restricted to the littoral and shallow water.

Does it Work?

The tests of the book will be how comprehensive and useful is the species' coverage and does it enable quick and accurate identifications. Let us start with the birds as they are the most easily observed group; 180 species are included. Of these, the inclusion of the Red-browed Treecreeper and the Southern Emu-wren, while omitting recent influxes of Grey Currawongs and Little Corellas, came as a bit of a surprise for modern Melbourne. In my bit of Melbourne the changes in the backyard bird list over the last ten years demonstrate the enormous changes in vegetation cover and altered hydrology that comes from intensive population growth. It would now be a great challenge to try and see all 180 species within a year in the area covered by the map on page xii. This book would be field guide enough as the photographs and descriptions are unambiguous. The notes are worth a browse to pick up interesting bits of information such as Great Crested Grebes eating their feathers to aid digestion, but to describe the call of the Little Wattlebird as 'mellow' is stretching it a bit; to me it is a raucous 'cooked apples'.

Two monotremes, twenty marsupials, seventeen bats and thirteen other placentals (nine of which are introduced) are the mammal complement. For most of them where they may be found in Greater Melbourne is listed and we are warned of two additional *Antechinus* that might be encountered. In the absence of any caution about catching or handling, do we need to examine them in the hand for identification? For the bats, yes; for the rest, mostly no. The Sugar Glider usually has a white tip to its tail, beautifully shown in the photograph on p. 227 and, from other sources, we read that this is a good field character to distinguish it from the Squirrel Glider, not a Greater Melbourne resident. I have stared long and hard at the book's front



cover wondering whether that tail tip is tending towards white, but it is a Squirrel Glider.

When we realise the number of freshwater fish (30), frogs (15), freshwater turtles (3), lizards (28) and snakes (9) listed for the Melbourne area we are surely surprised. Each native fish family has an introduction, which includes a fin formula or description that distinguishes it, and individual descriptions separate the species. Nine species accidentally or deliberately introduced into Victorian waters are included. In the absence of any specimens I used pictures from another field guide as a surrogate and was able to identify species. As their names suggest, *Crinia signifera* and *C. parinsignifera* are two very similar frogs which require experience to separate. Field marks, combined with the photographs, should be adequate to give you a high degree of success with the others, but read the descriptions carefully, being alert for the comment 'usually present'. *Litoria ewingi* and *L. verreauxii* might prove tricky. Because they are so hard to translate into English, a website address is given where frog calls may be heard.

There are sixteen species of small brown skinks with subtle differences in their

stripes, colours and types of scale. You won't identify them if you just get a fleeting glance, and even a photograph would need to be carefully oriented; you really need a specimen in the hand and in some cases some magnification to check the scales. The best technique will be to eliminate the obviously wrong species; the photographs are a great help with that. Then a slow and cautious stripe by stripe comparison should get you there. Nomenclature is up to date and the results of recent genetic work are given. All of the venomous snakes carry a warning (in the book) but the descriptions include scale counts and other features which need close examination; OK for road kills or sloughed skins but a bit dangerous otherwise. Again, very careful observation and reference to the descriptions and photographs are needed but juveniles will cause confusion.

When asked about the nature of God, biologist and atheist JBS Haldane replied that 'if He exists, He has an inordinate fondness for beetles'. One-third of Australia's named insect species are beetles, but this ratio is not replicated in the guide. Butterflies are overly represented and yet they have their own field guide. This brings us to the insects and other invertebrates. Freshwater insects have a section of their own and it is here I have found the first serious error in the book. *Notoaeschna sagittata* is a very poor choice for a Greater Melbourne dragonfly, being found in the north-east of the State, and the photograph of the adult is really a *Diplacodes*, which is common throughout suburban Melbourne.

Within the terrestrial insects there are the big groups (flies, bugs, beetles, wasps and moths) and the lesser known (lacewings, termites, web-spinners scorpion-flies, thrips and booklice). With so many to choose from, selection of species to include would not have been easy. The selectors have done a good job but I would willingly trade a few of the rarer butterflies for some more beetles. It would have been useful for family names to be included, particularly in what I have called the big groups, so that relationships might be more easily seen. Identification of insects, even to just family, is rarely easy, especially from photographs. Nevertheless, for most

of the species in the guide you should have a fairly high degree of success at least to the 'almost like' identification level. But look at the photograph of the ked on p. 84 and tell me how it differs from *Tapeigaster*, the fly which establishes a territory on toadstools where the females lay their eggs.

Information about terrestrial invertebrates other than insects is even harder to find, so it is good to have a few worms, molluscs, crustaceans, spiders and scorpions. Typical species have been chosen and, with usual caveats of the need for careful observation and the fact that there can be hundreds of others within the same group, identification from the photographs and descriptions should be successful.

And finally, to the most pleasant discovery of all, a section on the marine and littoral species of near Melbourne beaches, groups whose information is spread widely and in obscure places. Like their terrestrial counterparts some species will be unequivocally identified from their photographs, some will need very careful scrutiny, and some will be 'possibly similar to' because of the great diversity. Over one hundred invertebrate descriptions cover the range nicely and complement those species mapped in the Coastal Invertebrates of Victoria Atlas. Fifty-seven fish and three mammals complete the survey.

Who Should Buy?

If you are visiting the area, are weight-restricted, but want to know what you are seeing, try to squeeze a copy into your day luggage. If you are starting to notice nature while there is still some left, or are asked awkward questions by children but have only a small book collection, this could be the ideal starter pack. If your library is stocked with well thumbed copies of Pizzey, Simpson, Menkhorst, Cogger and even, perhaps, Zborowski, what then? In the contemporary scheme of things it is not an expensive book, it's nice to have it all in one place, and you will learn something new from the notes and the taxa you have glossed over up until now.

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